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SUBJECT: VOTING BEGINS IN EGYPT'S CONTENTIOUS LABOR UNION
ELECTIONS

REF: CAIRO 05336

SUMMARY

¶1. (SBU) THE LABOR UNION VOTE IS THE FIRST NATIONAL-LEVEL TEST FOR THE MUSLIM BROTHERHOOD (MB) FOLLOWING THEIR STRONG SHOWING IN 2005'S PARLIAMENTARY ELECTIONS. WHILE SOME ACCUSE THEM OF BEING WEAK ON "BREAD-AND-BUTTER" WORKER ISSUES, THEIR PARLIAMENTARY SUCCESS AND EFFECTIVE GRASSROOTS ORGANIZING COULD INCREASE THEIR INFLUENCE IN THE SECTOR, DESPITE ALLEGED GOE ATTEMPTS TO HINDER THEIR ABILITY TO FIELD CANDIDATES. CONTROVERSY AND PROTESTS SURROUNDING ALLEGATIONS OF GOE MEDDLING IN THE CREDENTIALING OF CANDIDATES HAS LARGELY DROWNED-OUT DEBATE OVER KEY ISSUES SUCH AS PRIVATIZATION AND JOB CREATION. END SUMMARY.

LABOR ELECTIONS KICK OFF

¶2. (U) ELECTIONS IN EGYPT'S LABOR UNIONS KICKED OFF NOVEMBER 8 AMID ALLEGATIONS OF GOE MEDDLING IN THE CANDIDATE SELECTION PROCESS AND HEIGHTENED SECURITY SUPERVISION OF OPPOSITION-AFFILIATED CANDIDATES. FOLLOWING WEEKS OF DELAYS AND WRANGLING BETWEEN THE MINISTRY OF MANPOWER AND MIGRATION (MOMM) AND THE OPPOSITION, AN ELECTION TIMELINE HAS BEEN SETTLED UPON: FACTORY COMMITTEE ELECTIONS FOR NOVEMBER 8 AND 13 (WITH 11 UNIONS' POLLS ON THE 8TH AND THE REMAINING 12 ON THE 13TH), NATIONAL UNIONS FOR NOVEMBER 20, AND COMPETITION FOR SEATS ON EGYPT'S UMBRELLA, AND SOLE LEGAL, TRADE UNION FEDERATION, THE EGYPTIAN TRADE UNION FEDERATION (ETUF) ON NOVEMBER 27 (NOTE: THE ELECTION STRUCTURE IS DESCRIBED IN REFTTEL. END NOTE.) PRESS REPORTS ESTIMATE MORE THAN 20,000 CANDIDATES WILL BE VYING FOR SEATS ON 1,000 COMMITTEES ON NOVEMBER 8, WITH SIMILAR NUMBERS OF CANDIDATES COMPETING IN ROUGHLY THE SAME NUMBER OF COMMITTEE ELECTIONS ON NOVEMBER

¶13.

¶3. (U) GIVEN THE CONTENTIOUSNESS AND OCCASIONAL VIOLENCE THAT HAS MARKED THE REGISTRATION PROCESS, THE GOE HAS DEPLOYED EXTRA POLICE AROUND POTENTIAL HOTSPOTS, INCLUDING DOWNTOWN CAIRO'S MAIN TAHRIR SQUARE AND ETUF HEADQUARTERS. THESE ARE THE FIRST NATIONAL-LEVEL ELECTIONS SINCE 2005'S PARLIAMENTARY

ELECTIONS, AND THE FIRST LABOR UNION ELECTIONS SINCE 2001.

CREDENTIALING CONTROVERSY

¶4. (SBU) THE CANDIDATE REGISTRATION PROCESS HAS FUELED CONTROVERSY, AS OPPOSITION GROUPS HAVE ACCUSED THE GOE OF IRREGULARITIES AND MEDDLING. THE MB HAS CRITICIZED WHAT IT DEEMS GOE-INSPIRED "CRACKDOWNS" ON MB-AFFILIATED WORKERS SEEKING TO RUN. THE MB STATED ON ITS WEBSITE THAT OVER 520 MB CANDIDATES HAVE BEEN DENIED CANDIDATE CREDENTIALS, AND THAT THE SECURITY SERVICES HAD SUBJECTED MANY MORE PROSPECTIVE CANDIDATES TO DETENTION, THREATS TO CAREERS AND FAMILY, AND "TEMPTATIONS" OR FINANCIAL INDUCEMENTS TO WITHDRAW THEIR NOMINATIONS.

¶5. (SBU) WORKERS FOR CHANGE (WFC), A GROUP AFFILIATED WITH OPPOSITION ORGANIZATION KEFAYA, DEMONSTRATED ON OCTOBER 29 DEMANDING JUDICIAL OVERSIGHT OF THE ELECTIONS AND ACCUSING THE MOMM OF MANIPULATING NOMINATION APPROVAL PROCEDURES IN ORDER TO BAR OPPOSITION CANDIDATES FROM RECEIVING THE NECESSARY CERTIFICATES. SPECIFICALLY, THEY CHARGE THAT THE GENERAL UNIONS ARE CLOSELY CONTROLLED BY THE NDP AND OFFICIALS RESPONSIBLE FOR VETTING APPLICATIONS ARE THEREFORE ARBITRARILY DENYING SOME CANDIDACIES. WFC CITES 630 WORKERS AS HAVING BEEN BARRED FROM COMPETING IN THE FIRST ROUND. WFC, THE MB AND OTHERS HAVE ALSO CRITICIZED THE SHORT APPEALS PERIOD FOR THOSE DENIED CERTIFICATION. THE MOMM TIMETABLE STIPULATED THAT CANDIDATE NOMINATIONS WOULD BE ACCEPTED OCTOBER 28-29, CANDIDATES ANNOUNCED OCTOBER 30, APPEALS ACCEPTED NOVEMBER 1-2, APPEALS HEARD NOVEMBER 3, AND FINAL LISTS ANNOUNCED NOVEMBER 4. OPPOSITION GROUPS CLAIMED THE PERIOD ALLOTTED TO HEAR APPEALS WAS INTENTIONALLY INADEQUATE.

¶6. (SBU) IN RESPONSE TO EARLIER ACCUSATIONS, MINISTER OF MANPOWER AISHA ABDEL HADI ANNOUNCED OCTOBER 26 THAT PROCEDURES FOR CANDIDACY WOULD BE "EASED," AND THAT AN MOMM OPERATIONS ROOM WOULD FIELD COMPLAINTS REGARDING THE CONDUCT OF THE ELECTIONS AND TO REPORT IRREGULARITIES. RESPONDING TO CRITICISM OF RULING PARTY INTERFERENCE IN THE CANDIDATE NOMINATION PROCESS, ETUF SECRETARY GENERAL MOHAMED MORSI STATED PUBLICLY THAT THE ELECTIONS WILL ENCOMPASS "ALL TRENDS AND PARTIES."

CLASHES, DETENTIONS

¶7. (SBU) CLASHES BETWEEN WORKERS AND SECURITY FORCES OCCURRED ON OCTOBER 29 WHEN 400 WORKERS FROM THE STATE-RUN ELECTRIC UTILITY PROTESTED OUTSIDE OF ETUF HEADQUARTERS DEMANDING ELECTION CERTIFICATES. SIMILAR DEMONSTRATIONS OCCURRED THROUGHOUT LATE OCTOBER AND EARLY NOVEMBER AS THE CANDIDATE REGISTRATION DEADLINE LOOMED. MB PEOPLE'S ASSEMBLY MEMBER SABER ABUL FOTOUH HAS CHARGED THAT THE "SECURITY AGENCIES" PREVENTED 25 PERCENT OF POTENTIAL MB CANDIDATES FROM RECEIVING ELECTION CREDENTIALS.

¶8. (SBU) MANY REPORTS OF ARRESTS AND DETENTIONS HAVE BEEN CIRCULATING ON THE INTERNET. THE MB ALLEGED ON OCTOBER 28 THAT SECURITY FORCES ARRESTED AT LEAST 20 MEMBERS SEEKING TO RECEIVE CANDIDATE CREDENTIALS, ALTHOUGH THE MINISTRY OF INTERIOR DENIED KNOWLEDGE OF THE ARRESTS. THE MB ALSO ALLEGED SECURITY FORCES PREVENTED 1,500 MB-AFFILIATED WORKERS FROM REACHING ETUF HEADQUARTERS TO PROTEST THE INTERVENTION OF THE SECURITY SERVICES IN THE ELECTIONS. WFC ALLEGED THAT ON OCTOBER 29 POLICE DETAINED ONE OF ITS ACTIVISTS WHO WAS PASSING OUT LEAFLETS IN FRONT OF ETUF HEADQUARTERS. THE LEAFLETS REPORTEDLY WERE DENOUNCING SECURITY INTERVENTION IN THE ELECTORAL PROCESS AND WARNING OF GOE VOTE RIGGING. ACCORDING TO THE GROUP, THE ACTIVIST WAS DETAINED FOR THREE HOURS AT AL-AZBAKIYA POLICE STATION AND THEN RELEASED.

THE MB'S STANCE

¶9. (SBU) THE MB PLANS A STRONG PUSH IN ALL LABOR SECTORS EXCEPT TOURISM, BUT ADDED THAT IT WILL NOT SEEK AS MANY SEATS AS IT BELIEVES IT COULD WIN. CURRENTLY, THE MB HAS PUBLICLY STATED IT WILL COMPETE IN 1,700 OF THE ROUGHLY 2,000 LOCAL UNION ELECTIONS. ALTHOUGH IT HAS NOT CIRCULATED A WRITTEN PLATFORM, THE MBS LABOR ELECTION PROGRAM SEEMS TO FOCUS ON THREE MAIN POINTS: REGAINING WORKER RIGHTS ERODED DUE TO ECONOMIC REFORMS, STANDING UP TO "ABUSES" OF THE PRIVATIZATION PROGRAM SUCH AS LAYOFFS AND EARLY RETIREMENTS, AND HIGHLIGHTING THE NECESSITY TO ENHANCE AND MAINTAIN EGYPTIAN INDUSTRY.

¶10. (SBU) REGARDING ELECTORAL SUPERVISION, MB PARLIAMENTARIAN SABER ABUL FOTOUH STATED TO THE PRESS RECENTLY THAT "IF THE ELECTIONS LACKED TRANSPARENCY, THE MB WILL TAKE THE CASE TO COURT, WHICH COULD RENDER THE WHOLE ELECTION PROCESS NULL AND VOID AS WAS THE CASE WITH RECENT (PARLIAMENTARY) ELECTIONS. THE OTHER ALTERNATIVE WILL BE FOR THE MB TO DECLARE A FREE LABOR UNION ORGANIZATION PARALLEL TO THE STATE-OWNED ONE." COMMENTING PUBLICLY LATER, HOWEVER, MB SUPREME GUIDE MEHDI AKEF SAID HE WAS NOT AWARE OF PLANS FOR A PARALLEL LABOR UNION ORGANIZATION AND THAT ANY ELECTION IRREGULARITIES WOULD BE DEALT WITH AS THEY ARISE.

¶11. (SBU) REGARDING ALLEGED GOE EFFORTS TO PREVENT A STRONG MB SHOWING, THE MB HAS ACCUSED STATE-OWNED COMPANIES IN THE TEXTILES, PETROLEUM, AND CHEMICAL SECTORS OF TRANSFERRING POTENTIAL-CANDIDATE WORKERS TO REMOTE LOCATIONS, REFUSING TO ISSUE WORKER CERTIFICATES FOR CANDIDATE CREDENTIALS, SUBJECTING EMPLOYEES TO HARASSMENT, AND IN SOME CASES, OFFERING FINANCIAL REWARDS NOT TO RUN.

SUPERVISION

¶12. (SBU) THE MOMM AND ETUF HAVE APPARENTLY ACCEDED TO AN ADMINISTRATIVE COURT VERDICT REQUIRING FULL JUDICIAL SUPERVISION OF THE ELECTIONS. IT IS NOT CLEAR, HOWEVER, HOW MOMM/ETUF WILL INTERPRET AND IMPLEMENT THE VERDICT. WHILE OPPOSITION GROUPS SUCH AS WFC ARGUE THAT "JUDICIAL SUPERVISION" MEANS A JUDGE IN EVERY POLLING STATION, ETUF HAS STATED SUPERVISION WILL BE AT THE BROADER, GOVERNORATE LEVEL. LATEST REPORTS INDICATE 32 JUDGES WILL BE DEPLOYED TO MONITOR THE ELECTIONS. NOT SATISFIED WITH GOE SUPERVISION ARRANGEMENTS, EIGHT NEWLY-ESTABLISHED CIVIL SOCIETY ORGANIZATIONS FORMED A NEW COALITION CALLED "THE EGYPTIAN COALITION FOR DEMOCRATIC SUPPORT" TO MONITOR BOTH THE LABOR UNION ELECTIONS AND UPCOMING JUDGES CLUB ELECTIONS. JUDICIAL SUPERVISION OF LABOR UNION ELECTIONS IS AUTHORIZED UNDER ARTICLE 41 OF LAW 35, PASSED IN 1976.

COMMENT

¶13. (SBU) WITH THE CANCELLATION OF MUNICIPAL ELECTIONS IN THE SPRING OF 2006, THE LABOR UNION VOTE IS THE FIRST NATIONAL-LEVEL TEST FOR THE MB FOLLOWING THEIR STRONG SHOWING IN 2005'S PARLIAMENTARY ELECTIONS. MANY IN THE LABOR COMMUNITY HERE DOWNPLAY THE MB'S CHANCE TO MAKE SERIOUS INROADS, ACCUSING THEM OF BEING WEAK ON "BREAD-AND-BUTTER" ISSUES SUCH AS HEALTH INSURANCE AND JOB CREATION. BUOYED BY THEIR PARLIAMENTARY SUCCESS AND EFFECTIVE GRASSROOTS ORGANIZING, HOWEVER, THEY HAVE A GOOD OPPORTUNITY TO INCREASE THEIR INFLUENCE, DESPITE ALLEGED GOE ATTEMPTS TO HINDER THEIR ABILITY TO FIELD CANDIDATES. TRADITIONAL LABOR PLAYERS SUCH AS THE LEFTIST COALITION, AND THE MAJOR OPPOSITION PARTIES SUCH AS AL WAFD, AL TAGAMMU, AND THE NASSERISTS, HAVE FAILED TO ASSERT THEMSELVES. CONTROVERSY SURROUNDING CREDENTIALING AND CANDIDATE INTIMIDATION HAS ALSO DROWNED OUT DEBATE OF KEY ISSUES FACING EGYPT'S LABOR FORCE SUCH AS PRIVATIZATION AND JOB CREATION.
RICCIARDONE